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AN EXPERIMENT IN APPLIED SOCIOLOGY. I

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The problem of citizenship training in our public schools is coming increasingly to the fore, and school men as never before are recognizing the grave civic responsibility which rests upon the schools. This responsibility is of two sorts. First, the organization of our schools must be so reconstituted that the disciplinary control becomes a preventive agency in meeting conditions that lead to juvenile delinquency. Second, all pupils must be offered a practical civic training preparatory to conscientious adult citizenship.

This problem presented itself to the San Francisco Normal School in twofold form: first, in the development of a method of approach to the classroom and school problem of civic training; second, in developing in the teacher the point of view necessary for the successful application of our method. Necessarily, both problems were attacked at the same time, as co-relative elements of a single whole.

One fact seems axiomatic: power and responsibility are inseparable. The teachers can in no way escape responsibility for the administration of the school. They cannot abdicate. At the same time the success of any plan of student self-control depends upon the degree to which the students accept responsibility for their own behavior. It therefore seems necessary to find that nice balance in the *sharing* of both power and responsibility between the faculty and pupils which will to the greatest extent develop the initiative of the pupils and afford that opportunity of mature guidance which will aid their growth.

The relationship must result from a teacher attitude that is different from the usual one. The attitude of combined "judge, jury, and prosecuting attorney," which many teachers adopt in

approaching the antisocial conduct of the children, must give way to something more closely approximating the psycho-analytic method, which, to quote Healy, "rests upon one foundation—that for explanation of all human behavior tendencies we must seek the mental and environmental experiences of early life." A desire to know the child and understand his motives must replace the irritated condemnation which so often follows misconduct or thoughtlessness.

At the present time, teachers are often their own worst enemies, for by their readiness to condemn on partial or circumstantial evidence they have taught the children that silence or even dishonesty is the easier path to choose. Impartial justice which takes into account all of the factors of misconduct is all too infrequent.

The successful application of the things that follow is predicated upon the adoption of the point of view suggested. The method of approach which Healy outlines in *The Individual Delinquent* points the way toward a plan for our schools.

The actual work with the children in our elementary department—the experiment applied to the grammar grades alone, H5 to H8 inclusive—may be divided into four elements; though in practice the four were parallel and complementary.

DEMOCRATIC DISCUSSION

The first type of work was termed "democratic discussion." This grew out of our assumption that practically all concerns of school administration which affect the children are of more interest to them than to the teacher; that they are the real losers in anti-social conduct upon the part of themselves or their schoolmates; and that they can be brought to a realization of this fact.

The discussions were led by a member of the faculty, whom we termed a "discussion leader." This is an essential feature of the plan, for the discussions relate to current practical situations, and the decisions reached must be final and not subject to subsequent faculty veto. In the hands of children alone decisions necessitating the veto would be inevitable at times; and nothing so completely deprives the group of the sense of power as the arbitrary veto. Furthermore with a child in the chair, discussions are not exhaus-

tive. This "discussion leader" is simply a chairman of the meeting, encouraging frank discussion, stimulating full consideration of all sides of the question, avoiding all semblance of influencing the discussion, expressing an opinion, or participating in the debate, but skilfully seeing that those factors which would influence a mature mind in forming a decision are considered by the children. Experience has proved that in the large majority of cases intelligent discussion and thoughtful consideration on the part of the pupils will bring them to the same conclusions which their elders would have reached without them. In many cases where the decision differed from what we would have expected, we found the children to be right, in practice. In cases where an impossible decision seemed inevitable, the discussion was left open at the close, with no ballot taken.

The discussions have been held with the classroom as a unit, or with all of the grammar-grade pupils participating during an assembly period. The size of the group has depended entirely upon the numbers of children affected by the particular subject for discussion.

The discussions may be of two general types: those which concern contemplated adjustments where a choice of alternatives is of minor importance to the faculty, but may be of major interest to the children; and those in which a definite course of action is to be pursued by the faculty unless a more satisfactory plan can be proposed and successfully carried through by the children. In neither case is willingness to assume responsibility lacking on the part of the faculty; opportunity is offered the children to carry a due portion of the responsibility, with full knowledge that their privileges are contingent upon success.

A few examples may serve to illustrate. A typical problem was the control of tardiness. A considerable tardy group had developed, and although remedial efforts were made, no diminution was apparent. For the primary grades, it was finally decided by the faculty to send home all tardy cases, and then deal with the parents; but in the grammar grades the matter was taken up in group discussion. The facts were laid before the pupils. The attendance rules of the state board of education were read and

explained. It was pointed out that the existing situation needed correction, and that the faculty was considering a plan for its solution. The pupil group, composed this time of all the grammar-grade pupils, was offered the opportunity of proposing a plan of their own. In the discussion which followed, it was pointed out by the children that the school had long tolerated a "straggler" group made up of pupils who arrived before nine o'clock—therefore not late—but not soon enough to participate in the flag-raising ceremony on the school grounds at 8:57. This group had assembled at one entrance, and had followed the last lines to the classrooms. It was stated by the children that this group interfered with the lines of those who arrived on time; and also that many "stragglers" had been in the yard but didn't have time to "get to line" between the assembly call and the bugle for attention. To meet this situation, the children asked that the time between bugles be extended from two to three minutes. They also suggested that the stragglers' line be abolished, that a record be kept of everyone who arrived too late for the flag ceremony, and that these names be read to the assembly each week.

The children's proposals were adopted. The suggested record was kept; the bugle interval was increased; and the names of tardy pupils publicly announced in assembly. Results were marked. From an average of ten tardy cases a day, not including "stragglers," during the week of the discussion, the average dropped to one a day at the end of two weeks, including "stragglers." For many weeks there were days with no tardiness at all. After a month announcement of names in the assembly was discontinued. With the approach of the end of the term, however, tardiness increased. This indicated, I think, the necessity for a renewal of the discussion and probably also of the practice of reporting tardy cases to the assembly. So far only two cases have had to be handled by the faculty.

A second example was that of a room where a certain general disorder involved practically the whole class. Surface indications were sufficiently evident but the room teacher did not understand what was going on beneath the surface. The discussion leader talked the situation over with the ringleaders, allowing them

plenty of time for thought. An initial blustering gave way after three or four days to a willingness to discuss the situation. We then went back to the classroom and had a general discussion. This was begun by having each of the boys involved present his case before the whole group. As each boy finished, general comments and contributions were presented by the class, until all the details of what had been going on had been brought to light. A rather ingenious bit of Penrodism was displayed. Brought out in the clear light of day, it lost some of its luster. The whole matter was discussed back and forth by the class, with practically no comment from the discussion leader. In the end the matter was roundly condemned by the children, and inquiries made as to what was going to be done about it. It was explained that the faculty was prepared to act in a summary manner—details of no importance at the moment—but that we were also willing to listen to anything which they had to propose, not in the line of “gilt-edged” punishment, but as a guaranty of future behavior. Half an hour of discussion among themselves was requested by the boys, and a class chairman was elected to preside at their meeting. The discussion leader withdrew during their deliberations.

Later, the discussion was resumed and a report called for in regard to their decision. The chairman reported that after some discussion a motion had been presented and passed, declaring it to be their intention to “cut out the monkey business.” His report elicited the statement from another that their meeting had been a farce, and that the proposed motion was not passed in good faith. Several others supported this statement. A warm discussion ensued, which resulted in the discussion leader’s being requested to ignore the report of their meeting, and to continue the discussion from the point where it had stopped, so that they could present their views in an attempt to formulate a proposal. The suggestion was accepted, and the discussion continued, with the result that the group as a whole expressed themselves as opposed to the kind of thing which had been going on, and requested that the teachers eliminate from the room any ringleader who might start trouble, and thereby assist the class to achieve the order and quiet which it desired. A distinction was drawn between the

type of freedom in the room which aided the advancement of their work and that which lapsed into misbehavior. The class bound itself to exert its public opinion to maintain the distinction in practice.

The proposal was accepted as a substitute for any contemplated action by the teachers. The results were entirely satisfactory. One very concrete achievement was the development of a class spirit which has since manifested itself in better marching in line and better sportsmanship on the playground. Such *positive* results seem of more value than the immediate success or failure in developing inhibitions against instinctive promptings to disorderly conduct which will be outgrown in time anyhow.

A large number of such examples might be presented. The discussions have tended to build up a very positive and definite co-operative spirit. Athletic discussion regarding our standards of sportsmanship resulted in an attempt on the part of the basketball team in the public-school league to eliminate fouling among our players. Such a hold on their imaginations did the "clean sportsmanship" idea take that the team has to its credit a league game in which not a single foul was called against it—quite a remarkable improvement. The game was lost by one point, but the student body displayed gratifying enthusiasm in the clean play of our team.

This "taking the children into partnership" has been extended to every phase of grammar-grade work to the end that public opinion is now almost completely governing the school. Many types of disciplinary difficulties have almost completely disappeared. The old semi-insolent attitude of many of the older pupils toward the inexperienced "student-teacher" has been replaced in all but exceptional cases by one of mutual co-operation.

The children feel perfect freedom to make suggestions in regard to the conduct of the school and are entirely frank in their comments. These latter are not always complimentary, but usually helpful.

DISCIPLINE ROOM

The foregoing sketch would be incomplete without some reference to the general method of handling discipline cases. It is

only fair to point out at the start that our clientele is such that few "problem" cases, such as are met with in schools of many congested districts, were found in our group. Nevertheless, the method of approach was founded upon a study of psychology, and our results justify the belief that it would prove generally applicable.

Our school has never practiced corporal punishment even to the extent of advising parents so to punish their children. Such a hard-and-fast rule may be unwise, for there are probably occasional instances where a sound thrashing is a necessary preliminary to the task of reform. Several of the larger boys frankly advised me that a good whipping would do them a world of good. Nevertheless we got results without the thought of it.

Because of the fact that all classroom teaching is done by student-teachers, a larger proportion of disorderly cases are sent out of the classroom than would ordinarily occur. In line with our general plan, these pupils, bringing their work with them, report to a classroom set aside for the purpose, which is in charge of a more experienced student-teacher. Here they enrol and go on with their regular work, with one exception: they are completely segregated from their former classmates. The recess and lunch hours differ from those of the regular schedule. The line assembles at a different place in the morning and is dismissed separately in the afternoon. No group work with other rooms is carried on. The regular classrooms are quite liberal in the matter of necessary talking and moving about the room, but in the discipline room all intercommunication without permission is forbidden.

After the first announcement in regard to the type of order expected in the discipline room, the matter stands without further comment. The teacher in the discipline room does not discuss the pupil's reason for being there, or refer to his difficulties in any way. With the exception of the segregation, everything is done to eliminate any idea of punishment. The principal or the classroom teacher who has sent the child out of the room visits the discipline room once or twice daily, at which time any of the children can ask for a hearing. This consists of an accounting from the child, given at his own volition, of his presence in the discipline room. A friendly chat follows in which an attempt is made to get to the

bottom of the motives underlying his actions. In a majority of cases this ends with the child's setting the time for his return to his own classroom. What is sought by the interviewer is evidence of a new point of view, understanding of the difficulty, determination to be a "better citizen," decision to "pull with the class"—at least something constructive. This has to come from the pupil himself. Only in a few stubborn cases is any outside pressure applied.

During all discussions, the pupil is encouraged to express his opinion frankly and tell all of the factors involved in the difficulty. If he wishes to complain of the teacher he is welcome to do so, but he is encouraged to keep on talking until his own blame is self-evident. Sometimes the teacher proves to be at fault, and the teachers have learned to recognize and acknowledge the fact, and lose no prestige in doing so. Outside of the interviews which the child himself seeks, no reference is ever made to his presence in the discipline room, or to the reasons therefor.

By far the larger part of the difficulties which bring children to the discipline room cure themselves. In some instances, cases demanding serious study of outside influences make themselves evident in a way which under our previous method would not have been possible. In every way we can devise, we encourage full, free, and frank confidence on the part of the children. In terms of mental anguish saved and constructive citizenship fostered, it would be hard to overemphasize the results.

In conclusion, let me re-emphasize certain essentials of this work. In the first place, the attempt all the way through has been to get a clear conception of the child's viewpoint, the child's motives, the child's interests, the child's welfare. We have not endeavored arbitrarily to impose an adult standard of values, but to aid the child in realizing his own proper standard of values. We have sought to remove artificial restraints, and allow the situations themselves to awaken in the child a realization of the need for such standards of values.

[To be concluded]